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TAGS: KDEM PHUM PREF PREL SOCI SY IZ  
SUBJECT: REFUGEE VOTING: IRAQI ELECTORAL COMMISSION RUSHES  
TO GET THE WORD OUT

REF: A. DAMASCUS 170  
1B. DAMASCUS 77  
1C. DAMASCUS 57  
1D. STATE 17254

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: With five days remaining before Iraqi refugees in Syria begin voting, officials at the Damascus office of the Iraqi Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) told us February 28 they were rushing to train election staff and get the word out in advance of the March 5-7 voting. IHEC officials said plans were proceeding on schedule to open polling sites in Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs. Iraqi electoral officials praised cooperation by the SARG in making logistical arrangements for the voting, but stressed they remained on guard for any efforts to improperly influence the voting. While Iraqi Embassy officials continued to express confusion over whether Iraqi refugees would be voting for a specific number of seats set aside for "out of country" Iraqis or vote as if they were living in their home provinces, IHEC officials clarified Iraqi refugees would now vote for candidates contesting seats in their home provinces. END SUMMARY.

"ON SCHEDULE": IHEC OPENS DAMASCUS OFFICE

¶2. (C) IHEC officials told us February 28 they were confident logistical arrangements for Iraqi refugees voting in the upcoming legislative elections were proceeding on schedule. Providing emboff a tour of IHEC's Syria office, which recently opened on one of Damascus' main thoroughfares, Iraqi electoral officials pointed to the high level of activity in the building as evidence preparations were well underway. Three IHEC officials arrived from Baghdad earlier this month to administer the elections for the hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees residing in Syria. According to Haider Zaidi, who runs the office, "Everything is going well, thank God."

¶3. (C) Zaidi's deputy, Esam Abdul Aziz Ibrahim, told us IHEC is using the final days before voting to train election staff and get the word out to Iraqi refugees. Ibrahim said IHEC has employed 1,000 Iraqis living in Syria to staff polling places in Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs, and 25 Iraqis were manning IHEC's Damascus office. The Iraqi Embassy informed us last week the SARG refused IHEC requests to open additional polling sites in the northeastern cities of Qamishli and Hassaka (ref. A). Ibrahim conceded the exact number of polling sites remained in flux, but said IHEC estimated between 30 and 50 polling stations would be opened in Syria. Ibrahim stressed IHEC was independent from the Iraqi Embassy and Iraqi political parties campaigning in Syria, and was receiving logistical but not financial support from the SARG.

¶4. (C) IHEC officials said training courses were taking place daily for election staff. Ibrahim showed Emboff and two

staff members a sample ballot for Baghdad province, explaining how voters would make their choices on election day. Iraqis will have to show two forms of identification, including proof of Iraqi citizenship, and would be able to register to vote on site. "It really is not that difficult to understand the process once we understand the ballots," one staffer opined, noting the large number of candidates listed on the ballot. "We have no doubt all our 1,000 staff will be sufficiently trained before the voting starts," Ibrahim concluded.

#### VOTER TURNOUT: GETTING THE WORD OUT

5.(C) Ibrahim said informing the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis living in Syria about election day details was a challenge. IHEC is using satellite television, advertisements, billboards, radio, and local newspapers to inform Iraqis about the location of polling sites. In addition, in cooperation with Syriatel, IHEC will send out on March 1 an SMS with information about the voting to each Syriatel customer who identified themselves as Iraqi when they registered for their mobile phone service. He said the office had conducted spot checks of Iraqi refugee communities to ascertain whether they were aware the elections were taking place, and concluded most refugees knew the dates of the voting. "But we still need to make sure they know where to go to vote," he noted.

6.(C) IHEC staffers conceded confusion had surrounded some of the details about the method being used to allocate "out of country" votes. The Iraqi Embassy told us last month "out of country" voters would select candidates for 15 seats being allocated to Iraqis living outside the country (reflets).

Ibrahim acknowledged this had previously been the assumption, but clarified that Iraqi refugees now will vote for candidates in their home provinces. "We will see where each voter, based on their identification, was born, and they will be given a ballot for their province. There will be no difference in the way a voter inside or outside Iraq votes," he explained.

#### MONITORING THE VOTING

¶7. (C) Journalists, NGOs, and several European observers will officially monitor the voting, according to IHEC officials. During his conversation with emboff, Ibrahim approved the credentials of a French journalist. "It's very important to us that journalists see that the voting is fair," Ibrahim stated. Iraqi electoral officials said the Arab League, the United Nations, and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) will be among the monitors. In addition, international observers from Romania, Germany, and Sweden will also participate. "We are focusing on transparency," an IHEC staffer stressed. Ibrahim praised SARG cooperation in assisting IHEC with logistical arrangements for the voting, but said his office remained on guard for any attempts to improperly influence the voting.

#### PREDICTING VOTER TURNOUT

¶8. (C) IHEC officials said it was "impossible" to predict voter turnout among Iraqis in Syria. "We don't even know the exact number of people here. But the important thing is our doors are open, we are ready, and any Iraqi who wants to vote is welcome," Ibrahim declared. Acknowledging that only 30,000 Iraqis in Syria voted in the last parliamentary elections, an IHEC staffer said if 50% turned out "we would be amazed." Representatives of several NGOs working with Iraqi refugees predicted low turnout due to voter apathy (ref. A).

¶9. (C) COMMENT: With just a few days remaining before the March 5-7 balloting in Syria, IHEC's planning has overcome a time-compressed deadline and significant logistical obstacles. As IHEC and Iraqi Embassy staff acknowledge, SARG cooperation has been a key factor in successful preparations thus far. The SARG may have its own reasons for encouraging

the largely Sunni Iraqi refugee community to participate, particularly if they vote as expected against Prime Minister Maliki's political allies. IHEC appears on track to meeting its goal of adequately training the nearly 1,000 employees who will staff the polling places. Getting the word out and stimulating voter turnout remains a more difficult challenge.

So long as a significant minority of Iraqi refugees turns out to vote and the elections remain free of widespread irregularities, IHEC is likely to declare victory in its task of facilitating voting in the country with the largest number of Iraqi refugees. END COMMENT.

HUNTER